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This study was made to determine the most prevalent errors, areas of weakness, and their frequency in the writing of letters so that a course in business communications classes at Kapiolani Community College (Hawaii) could be prepared that would help students learn to write effectively. The 55 participating students were divided into two groups that met two 1-hour-and-20-minute sessions a week for 18 weeks. Twenty-one different inaccuracies were compiled and ranked to frequency. In comparing weaknesses pertaining to reasoning with conventional errors in usage, the ratio was slightly more than 2 to 1. It was concluded that having successfully completed prerequisite courses and review work on style does not prepare students to write effective business communications. Recommendations were made that (1) students must be informed of the importance of one idea over another and given the ability to construct them in order to effect this relationship, (2) students should develop their power to reason effectively by analyzing problems, judging reader response, weighing values, and arriving at sound solutions, and (3) the teacher should enlist the help of other business teachers in obtaining various letter samples, newer texts, and tapes. (DG)

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STUDY OF FREQUENCY OF ERRORS AND AREAS OF WEAKNESSES IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS CLASSES AT KAPIOLANI COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Section I

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

If to a field commander before he engages his enemy "to be forewarned is to be forearmed," then to an instructor of business communications to know beforehand his students' weaknesses in written English is to become a more effective instructor.

Statement of Problem

For usually to the instructor are given only a course outline and an accompanying text. However, as most instructors have come to realize, such an outline embraces only the units to be covered within the scope of the course. The assumption made here is that the students have already mastered the art of selecting ideas and developing them into an effective business letter.

Even if a chapter or two on review of some of the general principles of style and structure are given, these, too, do not deal with the real areas of weaknesses that must first be overcome before the writing of all kinds of business letters and reports can be taught.

As it actually is, the filling in of these gaps of student needs runs concurrently with every unit throughout the course; thus it disrupts continuity and results in the loss of valuable time.

Purpose of Study

The objective of this study is to compile a list of the kinds of errors and areas of weaknesses and their frequency so that a course of study and instructional materials can be prepared that will more realistically dovetail the needs of students in learning to write effective business communications.

Section II

PROCEDURES

Composition of Classes

Of the 55 students participating in this study, 48 were Associate of Science degree candidates in secretarial science (64 units). And seven were certificate program students in stenography (48 units). (Three students dropped out; however they did not in any way affect this study, since they withdrew before the end of the second week.) All, except one, had successfully passed the prerequisite English 20, Essentials of Written English, a course in functional grammar and the mechanics of writing with emphasis on writing effective sentences, and English 21, Basic Composition, an expository writing course. Since the only transfer student from the 4-year Manoa campus, had had two semesters of freshman composition and had passed this course with a "C" average, her English 20 and 21 requirements were waived.

The 55 students were divided into two classes--27 in one and 28 in the other--and met twice a week for one hour and 20 minutes each session.

This is an 18-week course.

Preliminary Class Work

During the first week, communication theory, management requirements, and pyschology of business communication were studied. During the second and third weeks, review of writing style, word choice, sentence structure, paragraph construction, and conventions of grammar, spelling, and punctuation were covered.

These were taken as ample review work by the authors of the text and also allowed for by the course outline.

Following this two-week introductory and review work, a general approach to writing a business letter was begun. In this unit, lectures, discussions, and writing problems were directed at developing an optimistic business attitude, emphasizing the positive, and thinking in terms of reader interest and point of view. Additional work in avoiding platitudes, using specific language and writing effective beginning and ending sentences were taken and practice sessions held. In concluding this unit, how all of these factors were evident in writing three of the basic letter plans: the reader will be pleased (to say yes), reader will be displeased (to say no), and the reader will be neither pleased or displeased (to persuade) was shown and more practice writing sessions given.

First Letter Plan

Then, to take each of these letter plans in detail, the class first started on the routine or yes plan in detail. After a week of practice in writing parts of this letter, they contributed ideas with the instructor writing them on the board to compose a full-length letter. This cooperative effort was followed by having each student write two letters out of class. At the session immediately following an out-of-class assignment, the papers were first collected, then 12 - 15 samples were projected on a screen with an overhead opaque projector and a critical analysis was made by students as well as the instructor. Finally, the instructor's version was projected and explained how it met the requirements of the assignment.

For the first two letter samples the following plan for a routine request was followed:

1. Make major request in first sentence.
2. Follow major request with details that will explain reason for request.
3. Close with forward look to reader's next step.[1]

The third, which was also written out of class, was collected as the first of three samples for this project.

The following week another letter was assigned and collected as the second set of samples for this study. After this fourth attempt, a letter was written in class as part of an examination for this unit. Inasmuch as this letter was part of an announced examination, it was not included in the compilation.

Second Letter Plan

While the routine letter was quite easily mastered by most for both form and content, the refusal letter proved to be more difficult. For one thing, unlike the routine letter plan, the ideas had to be presented inductively rather than deductively. For another, writing in a psychologically palatable manner did not come easily to most. For still another, the step 1 to present an idea favorable, or at least neutral to the reader, as shown in the following plan, was extremely difficult for all:

1. Begin with thought upon which reader and writer can agree with something favorable to reader or at least with a neutral idea.
2. Lead naturally into discussion of reasons behind refusal.
3. Give reasons for refusals in impersonal language.

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[1]Himstreet and Baty, Business Communications, Second Edition, p. 165.

4. De-emphasize the "no" if saying it is necessary.

5. Give alternatives or use resale or sales promotion bid.

6. Close optimistically.[2]

As with the routine letter, each step in the foregoing plan was thoroughly discussed and samples of letters with marginal notes explaining how each step was written were projected on the screen. The students were then asked to write a letter out of class.

This was collected for the third and final set for this project. It should be added here that for none of the letters were restrictions on minimum or maximum number of words imposed. Rather, the suggestions given to students emphasized only the need to weigh, select, and use the necessary facts of the problems to accomplish the purpose of the letter.

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[2]Ibid., p. 180

Section III

PRESENTATION OF DATA AND INTERPRETATION

Sources of Errors

As soon as each set of the three letters was collected, the errors were categorized and compiled. The same procedure was followed for the other two sets. The letters were as follows:

Letter 1, written to Wiggins Insurance Company asking for $27 reimbursement. This amount was paid to the family physician for treatment of injury to finger.

Letter 2, another routine letter to Wilson Furniture Company requesting credit purchase of $2,000 worth of furniture for new home. Payment was to be made six months later when crops and livestock were to be sold.

Letter 3, a letter of refusal written to Mr. Calvin West, who had bought 6-volt "trouble light" but had burned it out by using it on his 12-volt car battery. It denied Mr. West's request for exchange with 12-volt light.

The errors and areas of weaknesses, their frequency and percentage of occurrences are presented in Table I, page 9.

Examples of the errors and weaknesses, not of the conventional grammar and usage errors follow:

Stereotyped or Weak Endings:

> We shall appreciate hearing from you soon concerning this matter.
> May we hear from you soon.
> We would be looking forward to seeing you again soon.
> We will credit your account for merchandise received.

When these examples were labeled as weak and hackneyed, students retorted that letters dictated in shorthand classes and typed in typing classes contained too often these same weaknesses.

Pointless Assertions:

In checking the "trouble light," we found that they were of no further use.
If the light had been returned in good condition, we could have been able to make an exchange or refund under terms of the guarantee.
or If the light had been used on a 6-volt battery instead of a 12-volt battery . . .
If we had received the light before it had been used we would have been able to exchange it.

These assertions were wholly confined to the refusal letter in which customer had burned out his 6-volt light.

Illogical Statements:

While you bought the 6-volt light for $6.95, a 12-volt light costs $9.95.
By giving our mail-order customers a faster, lower-cost delivery, we encourage them to check all orders carefully.
Because I always made cash purchases, Mr. Johnson and I would like to buy about $2,000 worth of furniture for our new home.

With these, too, the samples were more prevalent in the refusal letter.

Lack of Subordination:

Recently we built a new home, and we want to furnish all our rooms with new furniture.
The Bank of Clarksville handles all of my financial transactions, and I have a balance of $400 in my account at this time.
The injury was not serious, but it required eight stitches to close. I was treated by Dr. John Smith, and I paid my bill at that time.

This fault occurred about equally throughout the three letters.

Although only four out of a total of 21 errors, the foregoing errors, including the fault of not using coherence devices, total 47.9 per cent. All of these errors are directly or in some way related to faulty thinking. Even the stereotyped or weak endings, although not directly reflecting poor reasoning, do show shoddy mental application.

Other errors that follow, while not as nearly as great in number of occurrences, still do reflect poor thought processes:

Poor Choice of Words:

. . . my funds are unstable.
. . . furniture would add to the structure.
If the light had not been tampered with . . .
After the repair department had investigated your . . .

Redundancy, Wordiness:

Split-level type of home
In cash I have a balance of $400
A piece of land which is about three acres in size in Clarksville
Tags are attached to the lights to serve as reminders for our customers because we want to be sure they use the right battery when they plug the light in.

Incorporating Obvious Idea in Principal Clause:

We have received the 6-volt trouble light you returned to us for refund.
We have enclosed our new mail-order catalogue.
Enclosed for your convenience is our self-addressed stamped envelope.

Not Being Forthright:

Would it be possible for me to buy on credit?
Please suggest a credit plan to meet my needs.
. . . as to my position for credit.

Stilted Expressions:

Will you please inform me if we, Mrs. Johnson and I, . . .
Please extend credit privilege

Using Platitude:

It is natural for human beings to make mistakes.

Examples of errors in grammar, usage, paragraphing, and coherence, have not been included, for they were of the standard variety.

TABLE I

FREQUENCY OF ERRORS AND WEAKNESSES

Complied From 159 Letters

	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE	RANK
Stereotyped or Weak Endings	25	11.8	1
Pointless Assertions	22	10.3	2
Lack of Coherence Devices	20	9.4	3
Illogical Statements	18	8.5	4
Lack of Subordination	18	8.5	5
Poor Choice of Words	18	8.5	6
Redundancy, Wordiness	17	8.0	7
Not Following Letter Plan	17	8.0	8
Incorporating Obvious Idea in Principal Clause	16	7.5	9
Poor Paragraphing	10	4.7	10
Shift in Tense	8	3.8	11
Not Being Forthright	5	2.3	12
Error in Subject-Verb Agreement	4	1.9	13
Dangling Modifiers	3	1.4	14
Misplaced Modifiers	3	1.4	15
Lack of Transitional Sentence	2	0.9	16
Stilted Expressions	2	0.9	17
Error in Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement	1	0.5	18
Shift in Voice	1	0.5	19
Use of Platitude	1	0.5	20
Negative Expression	1	0.5	21
TOTAL	212	99.8	

Comparison of Errors

It now becomes evident that a comparison between errors pertaining to reasoning and errors in grammar and usage be made. This relationship is shown in Table II, page

As it is with nearly all such classifications, a number of these errors can be grouped under either headings. For example, lack of subordination could have been included under grammar-usage-construction category. Conversely, lack of coherence device and transitional sentence and poor paragraphing could have been grouped under the reasoning group. For these strongly reflect the student's grasp of his problem and the effective thinking process that follows.

In any case, these groupings 67.3 per cent or 143 errors out of a total of 212 significantly indicate that weaknesses of most students are not in the area of grammar, usage, and sentence and paragraph structure, but in the area of reasoning: the selection of relevant ideas and the logical development of these ideas to achieve the action desired in a business communication.

TABLE II

RELATIONSHIP OF WEAKNESSES PERTAINING TO REASONING TO ERRORS IN GRAMMAR AND USAGE

	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Stereotyped or Weak Endings	25	11.8
Pointless Assertions	22	10.3
Illogical Statements	18	8.5
Lack of Subordination	18	8.5
Poor Choice of Words	18	8.5
Not Following Letter Plan	17	8.0
Incorporating Obvious Idea in Principal Clause	16	7.5
Not Being Forthright	5	2.3
Stilted Expressions	2	0.9
Negative Expression	1	0.5
Use of Platitude	1	0.5
TOTAL	143	67.3

	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Lack of Coherence Device	20	9.4
Redundancy, Wordiness	17	8.0
Poor Paragraphing	10	4.7
Shift in Tense	8	3.8
Error in Subject-Verb Agreement	4	1.9
Dangling Modifiers	3	1.4
Misplaced Modifiers	3	1.4
Lack of Transitional Sentence	2	0.9
Error in Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement	1	0.5
Shift in Voice	1	0.5
TOTAL	69	32.5

Section IV

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study was made to determine the most prevalent errors and areas of weaknesses that are found in letters written during the first several weeks in Business Communications classes at Kapiolani Community College. After the errors were categorized, 21 different inaccuracies were compiled and ranked according to frequency. In comparing weaknesses pertaining to reasoning with conventional errors in usage, the ratio was slightly higher than 2:1.

Conclusions

Although students have successfully completed the prerequisite courses and review work on style--word choice, sentence and paragraph construction, conventions of grammar, spelling and punctuation--these do not, taken in this sequence, prepare the student to write a piece of effective business communication.

Not forewarned of the real conditions, textbook authors and most instructors have been emphasizing these areas and not giving enough attention to excite and sharpen the student's reasoning powers.

Recommendations

Of vital importance, therefore, even when such areas as building vocabulary is taken, is the concern that in-depth study of words should go beyond to the connotative aspects and levels of usage, for a businessman is constantly in need of words that do not offend as well as those that are highly complimentary.

In a sentence or a paragraph structure, a student must also be made aware of the importance of one idea over another and given the ability to construct them in order to effect this relationship. Along with this, economy of expression and avoiding circumlocution will be a continuing and supporting preparatory work.

This presentation should then lead into unity or holding a tight leash on ideas: by weeding out obvious ideas in principal clause, stereotyped expressions, lack of subordination. In this regard, besides doing all the work himself, the instructor should enlist the help of the shorthand and typing teachers, for letter samples used in drill work in these classes appear to run counter to all that the business communication instructor is trying to do. For a start, the acquisition of newer texts and tapes in their classes must be recommended. If not, these skill subject teachers should be asked to make known the existence of these inaccuracies in their letters.

But most important to this work is the adoption of the case method approach to business problem solving. Analyzing problems, judging reader response, weighing values, and arriving at sound solutions should be given step-by-step treatment as frequently as possible through classroom discussions, not as assignments to be done in isolation in the student's study room. Indeed, developing the power to reason and to reason effectively is the most crucial factor in learning to write good business communications.

At this point, one may hasten to interject that all of these, to some degree, are covered in English 21, Basic Composition, and therefore such

a treatment will become sheer repetition. This is true. Nonetheless, as shown by the results, the fact remains that they still need this work; and so it remains for the instructor to give more--not less--of the same work. However, it must always be kept in mind that they will become meaningful and beneficial only if the problems are clothed in real-life business procedures and situations.

SECTION V

ADDENDA

TABLE III

LETTER SUBMISSION BY EACH CLASS

LETTER	9:00 class		12:00 class	
	Number turned in	Number failing to turn in	Number turned in	Number failing to turn in
Wiggins Insurance Company request for reimbursement	27	0	27	1
Wilson Furniture Store request for credit purchase	27	0	27	1
Mr. Calvin Wills refusal	25	2	26	2
TOTAL for both classes	159	6		

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Himstreet and Baty, Business Communications, Second Edition, Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., Belmont, Califor., 1964.